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ABSTRACT

Oral language is an important component of literacy development, yet is often ignored in research and stifled in the classroom. The varied contexts for literate talk in a first-grade classroom were explored. Oral sharing time, writing workshop, reading workshop, whole-class reading time, and project-centers time provided opportunities for rich exchanges about things of interest to the children. The connected community that the teacher built enabled children to work toward literacy in ways that each found useful and satisfying. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/RS)

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Talking to Read and Write:
Opportunities for Literate Talk in One Primary Classroom

Lee Galda Betty Shockley A. D. Pellegrini

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Instructional Resource No. 12
Spring 1995

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Lee Galda
Betty Shockley
A. D. Pellegrini
University of Georgia

INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE NO. 12
Spring 1995

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318 Aderhold
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
(706) 542-3674 Fax: (706) 542-3678
INTERNET: NRRC@uga.cc.uga.edu

NRRC - University of Maryland College Park
2102 J. M. Patterson Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742
(301) 405-8035 Fax: (301) 314-9625
INTERNET: NRRC@umail.umd.edu

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National Reading Research Center
318 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-7125
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About the Authors

Lee Galda is Professor of Language Education at the University of Georgia and an investigator with the National Reading Research Center. She received her Ph.D. from New York University and has written widely in the areas of early literacy and children's response to literature.

Betty Shockley is a teacher with the Clarke County School District in Athens, Georgia. She is currently participating in a job exchange with Jim Baumann that allows Jim to teach second grade for Betty at Fowler Drive Elementary School while Betty teaches for Jim in the reading department at the University of Georgia. Betty is also a graduate student in Language Education and director of the NRRC's School Research Consortium. She has co-authored two books, *Engaging Children* and *Engaging Families*, with Barbara Michalove (Clarke County Schools) and JoBeth Allen (University of Georgia).

A. D. Pellegrini is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Georgia and an investigator with the National Reading Research Center. He received his Ph.D. from Ohio State University and has also taught at the University of Rhode Island. His research and teaching interests center around children's development in school and family contexts.

Talking to Read and Write: Opportunities for Literate Talk in One Primary Classroom

Lee Galda
Betty Shockley
A. D. Pellegrini
University of Georgia

National Reading Research Center
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Instructional Resource No. 12
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Abstract. *Oral language is an important component of literacy development, yet is often ignored in research and stifled in the classroom. We explored varied contexts for literate talk in one first-grade classroom. Oral sharing time, writing workshop, reading workshop, whole-class reading time, and project-centers time provided opportunities for rich exchanges about things of interest to the children. The connected community that the teacher built enabled children to work toward literacy in ways that each found useful and satisfying.*

Often we are afraid to let our students talk too much. We worry that if they are talking together they are not learning, either because the talk that they do is not related to what we are teaching or because talk itself is a waste of precious school time. But, we have known for a long time that talk is important to children's learning and is a crucial component of the processes of learning to be literate people (Dyson, 1988, 1989, 1993).

The many studies of young children's oral language development tell us that:

1. Children learn how language is used while they are learning language;

2. Children learn language by using it for real purposes within social situations; and

3. Factors in the social context heavily influence language use and learning. (Pinnell & Jaggar, 1991)

We also know that children's oral communicative competence is related to their literacy development (Dickinson, 1987; Torrence & Olson, 1984). And several British studies (Barnes, 1976; Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1971; Rosen & Rosen, 1973) describe how oral language use influences learning. The importance of providing varied and changing opportunities for oral language use in our classrooms (Britton, 1970; Halliday, 1978), however, is often forgotten in the pressure of helping young children learn to be literate.

What children do, what they talk about, and with whom they talk are significantly related to the development of reading and writing. When children interact in different kinds of events, they develop the ability to reflect upon the social, cognitive, and linguistic processes that they and others use (Bernstein, 1960; Piaget, 1983; Halliday, 1978). Some events, like joint book reading and social fantasy play, are considered especially important contexts for developing literacy. The kind

of language used in these contexts is often referred to as "literate language." Talking about thinking, knowing, reading, writing, words, letters, sounds, and people and things that are not present in the immediate environment is considered a positive predictor of success in learning to read and write.

Furthermore, the social network theory (Cochran & Riley, 1988) proposes that the variety of literacy events experienced (such as joint book reading, letter writing, and reading the comics) and the variety of participants in those events (such as mother, father, siblings, and grandmothers) should relate to children's social competence and use of literate language at school. By interacting in more, compared to less, diverse contexts, children view more models of literate behavior as well as encounter discrepant information to which they must accommodate.

Language is also social, in that children talk to create themselves and their place in their world. This social talk, like literate language, is also important to children's literate development. Dyson (1988, 1989) shows clearly how both intentional and unintentional helping goes on when children are given the opportunity to talk as they are reading and writing. In his study of Pat McLure's first/second-grade students discussing the books they read, Newkirk (1992) documents the importance of the resulting rich conversations of these children. It was through unstructured talk that these children appropriated the books they read, making them important by linking them with their lives outside of school.

We explored how oral language in varied contexts related to reading and writing development in one exemplary first-grade classroom in a study conducted with Betty in her classroom during the 1992-1993 school year. We documented the varied contexts for literate talk that occurred during the school day and explored how this talk related to the development of reading and writing (Pellegrini, Galda, Shockley, & Stahl, 1994). The results demonstrated the importance of a variety of opportunities for interactions with peers during literacy events and the influence of reading and responding to books at home. The more that children talked with each other in diverse groups, the more they used language that related positively to literacy development. Children's use of cognitive and linguistic terms, more frequent during oral interactions with a variety of peers, was related to their phonological awareness and to a variety of formal measures of reading and writing. Providing children with the opportunity to interact with a variety of people around diverse literacy events, both at home and at school, provides them the opportunity to talk about language and meanings that are conveyed solely through language. This kind of talk is talking to read and write, and it can occur in any classroom.

What are the contexts that encourage this kind of talk? In Betty's room, oral sharing time, writing workshop, reading workshop, whole class reading time, and project centers time provided opportunities for rich exchanges about things of interest to the children, and thus fertile ground for literate talk.

Oral Sharing Time

Oral sharing time had a special name, derived from a student's ritual opening during the previous school year. "Y'All Know What?"

became the call that beckoned students to an opportunity for literate talk that began each day. From the beginning, children talked, listened, and borrowed ideas from each other as they brought their lives to school and shared them orally. Fieldnotes taken by Lee on September 1, during the second week of school, show the variety and excitement that permeated "Y'All Know What" and made it such a rich opportunity for literate talk.

> It is first thing in the morning and "Y'All Know What" time has just begun. Jason shows and talks about his penny that was squished on a railroad track; Ami shows the story she wrote the day before, holding the book up for the class to see and moving it around the circle. She comments: "I was gonna write 'the end' but I didn't find out the words." Kimberly sounds out "t h e e n d" and Betty says, "I'll help you." Ami ends with, "But I didn't have time to write it." Jenna tells a story about the sea and Betty comments, "Oh, Jenna, you ought to write about that sometime." Jenay says she's going to have a party and puts a sign-up sheet on Betty's desk. Penjata tells an elaborate story full of "and thens" and punctuated by the refrain, "Where's my bookbag?" uttered in a very dramatic voice. Betty chimes in, "You know what? It's neat to write stories with characters talking like that, like you really talk." Rick then tells his story, with sound effects, about swimming in a neighbor's pool—a very exaggerated, funny story. Betty says, "Oh, what a tall tale that is!" She then turns to the group and asks, "Why do you like Rick's story?" Various children respond, "Because it was funny." Betty says, "Yes. And he used sound effects." Jenay comments, "And he said 'hey, man'." Betty notes, "Yes, he talked like people would. So that you can understand it. Rick took something that really happened to him, like he really went swimming, and put extra stuff in it and made it fun. I loved it. I loved everybody's stories. It was so fun to hear what you have to say. You're all so interesting."

Already, just one week after school had begun, the children began to display a personal style, relate oral language to their writing, and borrow ideas, language, and structures from each other. These things originated with the children, but Betty made them explicit, helping the children see what they already knew how to do.

As the children changed and the classroom community developed, "Y'All Know What" changed over time from a forum for sharing home lives with school companions and for rehearsing potential ideas for writing to a time to retell familiar stories, demonstrating to all the skill of the storyteller and engaging the audience in a happy recreation of a familiar tale. As the children became comfortable with sharing oral stories from home, Betty introduced them to new possibilities during sharing time, just as she moved from asking everyone to share each day to having smaller numbers of children sharing on assigned days. Rick's introduction of the tall tale on September 1 provided an early introduction to the many possibilities for oral sharing that were present in Betty's room. After this day, children continued to recount things that happened at home and to describe how they wrote stories or built lego creations in the classroom. They also began to make up stories, tall tales that often

found their way into the writing workshop. As the children became increasingly familiar with the stories in the many tradebooks in Betty's classroom, they developed favorites, stories that they enjoyed retelling. Thus, another option for sharing time began. As the children retold familiar stories, they made the language of the story their own, adopting the words, rhythms, and intonations of the written word as they sought to recreate familiar tales. These occasions were always highly interactive, with the whole class listening carefully and helping the teller remember sequence, phrasing, intonation, and tone. Jenna attempted to retell *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* after Betty read it to the whole class:

> Once upon a time, there was three goats. Three billy goat Gruffs and they were brothers. They wanted to go in the meadow because they wanted to get fat. Then they were walking the hillside, they saw a BIGGGG bridge (*indicates the bridge with a gesture*) and there was a troll, a little troll who lived under the bridge . . . . And when the first . . . the real small billy goat walked across the bridge . . . the troll came out and said . . . . Trit trot, trit, trot . . . . and then the troll came out . . . and he said, "Who is [*Another student*: Who is that jumping on my bridge?] that trapping on my bridge?" . . . And the little billy goat said, "Oh, it's only I, the little billy goat." . . . and then he said "I will gobble you up." [*Another student echoes*: "I will gobble you up."]

Toward the end of the telling, the other students were enrapt in Jenna's recreation. Just as the big billy goat is telling the troll to "Come on out here and see what you can do," another student chimes in: "Come on *out* here and see what you could do. Hit him with a big horn!" Not only the storyteller was making the story language her own.

In whatever form it took, oral sharing time was an invaluable opportunity for students to use language to talk about events and people who were not physically present, to talk about reading, writing, effective speaking, and language itself, as they considered the effectiveness of language. This kind of talk is literate talk and relates to children's development as readers and writers.

Writing Workshop

Another rich context for talking about language was the writing workshop. During writing workshop, the children worked individually and collaboratively on writing projects of their choice for 30-40 min. Never was the workshop quiet; rarely was the talk off task. Working at small tables promoted collaboration among the children whether Betty or her aide was there or not. A description of a day in mid-October, 7 weeks after school began, demonstrates the feeling in the room during writing workshop:

> Eighteen first-grade children are scattered throughout the room filled with pictures, books, children's writing, words, tapes, a singing bird, paper, pencils, and markers. The children are busily engaged in writing. There is a hum of talk as children ask—of those at the table where they are working—how to spell a word. Various children offer spellings and discuss which is correct. The

writer puts down what she considers best, then goes on. Children are murmuring to themselves, talking with Betty, Mrs. E., and Lee. Suddenly, Ami bursts into song. Other children pick up her song and continue writing, singing.

Writing workshop was always filled with the hum of busy voices, if not song.

Many of the children composed aloud as they wrote, either saying the words that they intended to put on paper or spelling aloud. An audible vocalization when spelling received immediate help from neighbors, even if not explicitly requested. On September 30, John is reading his story to Lee, who is seated at the table with him and four other children, when Jason offers unsolicited help:

John: (*Leaning over his paper*) One time/

Jason: (*Leaning over John's paper*) One starts with a O.

Lee: Jason says that one starts with an O.

Jason: 'Cause I remember from kindergarten.

Help with spelling came in a variety of forms, as Kimberly demonstrated on September 1st. When Shuntae asks the table at large, "How do you spell Ms. Shockley?" Kimberly jumps up and gets a book, returning with it open to the inside page, saying, "Here's how to spell Shockley. Just go get a book that her name is on and copy it. Her name is on all of the books in the classroom."

Collaborating during writing also involved talk to plan writing with a writing partner. Jenna and Brooke often worked together, with both planning the writing, Jenna doing the actual writing, and Brooke illustrating the piece. At other times, they would work on parallel books, with each writing on separate papers but making sure that they were writing the same thing. At other times, especially toward the end of the year, they would sit together, offering each other help with spelling, with ideas, and being a "listening ear" when asked, but working on totally separate pieces.

There were many varied opportunities for talk during writing workshop, and the children had both informal opportunities to move around the room as well as structured opportunities to work with new people when they worked with different groups. Never told to write silently, they used talk to support their language learning as they took chances and grew as writers.

Time to share writing grew from a time for children to show each other what they had done that day to a time for children to show their work and invite helpful feedback from their classmates. As individual students read their writing, Betty and other students would comment on their drawings, the words they chose to use, the punctuation they used, and the general nature of their piece. Ranging from "Oh, I like that part" to "That's funny!", student comments indicated that they were attending to the author's voice and took their role of audience seriously, just as they did when they were at their tables during writing workshop.

Reading Workshop

Reading workshop (when children were free to select books, read, and respond as they chose) followed writing workshop for most of the school year and began as children finished writing or sharing their writing and moved toward the hundreds of books that were in their classroom. As children selected their books, they moved to wherever they were comfortable reading. Some returned to the tables where they had been writing. Some sprawled on the rug near the bookshelves; others sat on the stage in the center front of the room or in front of the adult desks which were over in a corner. Some took books to the audiocenter and listened to them on tape. A few students would go out into the hall for a quiet spot. Jenay liked best to get into a carton that was near the reading corner, taking all of the stuffed animals with her, and read to them. Children read individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. Some worked with Betty and her aide; some read to whoever was observing that day.

The field notes from October 27 illustrate some of the variety of partnerships and configurations that were possible during reading workshop:

> Children move into reading time gradually. Ivy points as she reads. She's using picture cues for the nouns. Adrienne sits next to her, reading the pictures and telling the story from memory, running her fingers over the words. Ivy insists on helping. Pakaysanh is looking at a dinosaur pop-up book, *David Dreams of Dinosaurs*. John asks me to read *Berenstain Bears Trick or Treat*. A group of children are gathered around Betty, reading. Ami is still working on her drawing. Pakaysanh gets *The Magic School Bus*. Some children are in the hall reading and putting a play together. Jason reads from memory, looking at words only when he needs prompting. Marianesha and Adrienne are partner-reading *Rosies's Walk*. Dennis, Andrew, Desmond, Jenay, Ivy, Jenna, and Jason are now in the hall reenacting *Rosie's Walk* with cards.

As with writing time, there was a lot of helping talk. Children chatted quietly about the books they were selecting, often arranging to swap after they had finished with their first choices. Sometimes children would take the pile of books written by the author they were studying, and a small group would work their way through the pile. The students knew who was a good reader and who could help them when they ran into difficulties. It was common to hear children asking those around them for help decoding difficult words, sharing funny bits from the text, and doing partner-reading, alternating pages or characters' dialogue.

Whole Class Reading

Whole class reading looked different each day, but there was always the opportunity for oral interaction around the texts being read. Sometimes Betty read a big book, inviting children to look closely at the words and the pictures. When this happened, the talk was concerned with sounds of letters, words, placement, linearity, illustration-text match, and information in the illustrations. At other times

Betty read from regular trade books, and the talk revolved around the author and the story. Children would readily discuss the choices the author made in telling the story, other books that they remembered as they related to the story, and things that had occurred in their lives that related to the story. In this respect, Betty's classroom looked like others where children listen and respond to trade books (Cochran-Smith, 1984).

Because Betty valued oral language experiences so much, the whole class reading time frequently moved into dramatic reenactments. These dramatic reenactments gave children an opportunity to use talk to plan, to perform, and to respond. Furthermore, like the oral retelling of familiar stories, dramatic reenactments provided the opportunity for children to make book language their own.

On a day when Betty read *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* during whole class reading, the children asked to do a play. The following dialog is taken from a video/audiotape and fieldnotes for March 2.

Betty: You all are asking me if maybe we could do a play of *Billy Goats Gruff*. Now to talk about that. Let's see. Well, let me ask, Dennis, how many characters do we need?

Students: Four

Betty: Oh, boy! There are a lot of Dennises here. You all think fast. Four characters. Who might they be?

Students: Troll and three goats.

Betty: The troll and three goats.

Student: Somebody needs to be the bridge.

[*Students are all talking at once when one takes a bench that is in the reading corner and begins to drag it into the center of the room.*]

Betty: Oh, that's a good bridge.

[*Students and Betty discuss who will play which parts, that there will be several groups of players, and that those not performing will be the audience.*]

Betty: Hey, that looks like a meadow. Now, see. Why don't you pretend that that rug is the grass and you can come from this side.

Jenay: Can I be the narrator?

This was just one of many times when these students played with the stories they were reading. Since music was so prevalent in this classroom they often turned their stories into "operas," singing, for example, Sendak's *Chicken Soup with Rice* and *Pierre*. Don and Audrey Wood's *The Napping House* and *King Bidgood's in the Bathtub* were also dramatized, providing real opportunities to use story language and structure. These dramatic reenactments did not take place only during or after reading. They also found their way into project centers at the end of the day.

Project Centers

Children were free to choose from a number of centers at the end of the day. What these

centers were and how they worked was negotiated between Betty and her students, providing yet another opportunity to use oral language in a meaningful way. Many students chose to work on the writing that they had begun earlier in the day; others chose to read. Some did legos and puzzles or went to special centers that related to the curriculum. Many chose to do plays, reenacting stories that they had heard or read together. These performances sometimes took place in the hall, where a dramatic play center was set up and shared by the other primary grade classrooms in the wing. This center housed kitchen equipment, tables and chairs, and a big box of dress-up clothes. Often, small groups of children would organize a play during centers time, playing to an audience of themselves usually, but sometimes performing for the rest of the class just before dismissal. Children also would do reenactments in the classroom, working on the small stage in the center front of the room.

Children also used this time to do dramatic readings of favorite stories with a peer or peers, perching on a high stool or standing on the stage. It was obvious that these readings, like the reenactments, were done primarily for the readers' pleasure, rather than audience reaction.

During center time, individual children wore microphones, and their oral language was audiotaped at least seven times per child across the school year. Analysis of these audiotapes indicated that children were using literate language. They were using language to reflect on the social, linguistic, and cognitive processes that they and others used. Center time was thus another time in which children used oral language in ways that related positively to their reading and writing.

Beyond the Classroom

Betty also encouraged literate talk at home. Students took home a book and their journal three times a week to read, talk, and respond with someone at home (another context for talking to read and write). Talk was encouraged, with Betty often reminding students that "Talk is the most important thing." Children were free to work with anyone at home—and there was great variety. We discovered, in fact, that the more people that children read and responded with at home, the more people they worked with at school. This variety in their social networks at school related to performance on some measures of reading and writing and to the use of some types of literate language.

The journals also gave Betty the opportunity to carry on literate discussions in writing with her students and their families. The home journal procedure is more fully described in *Creating Parallel Practices* (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995).

The Teacher's Role

The community that Betty and her students built was rich with talk, thanks to Betty's planning and her belief in the importance of talk. During an interview on January 14, Lee and Betty talked about the ways in which Betty deliberately built a classroom community that supported children's acquisition of literacy, considering the role that Betty played as a literate other in that classroom community.

Betty: Because of my personal connectedness [to reading and writing] I have become a more skillful leader of literate wisdom for my students. I've been there, I am there, I'll always be there . . . .

Lee: You know, I think when you and Barbara (another teacher) say things like you "just try to get out of the kids' way," you really mean it and it is true. You get out of the kids' way because you know that you have given them a variety of ways, ideas for the paths that they can take, for the ways that they can go, for the books that they can read, for the people they can read with, for the strategies they can use [for reading], for the strategies they can write with, for the ideas they can use. They all have lots of choices that they can make, but not choices that they thought up all by themselves . . . . So when you get out of their way you get out of their way to allow them to do things that either you have told them about or things that they have discovered with your help [and that of their friends and family]. It's not like you are sitting saying, "Okay kids, become literate." When I watch you, I think you do an amazing amount of teaching. You're always connecting things for kids, connecting books to books. Today Rick said "Kaboom" and you said, "No, Anansi isn't here, but that would be a good one." That's something literate people do. You did it, it was no big deal, no fuss. They all [make those connections] now because you have been doing that since day one.

Betty: It was wonderful to watch.

Lee: So you get out of their way, but you also behave like a literate person and demonstrate a lot of literate behaviors and often will make it explicit . . . . You get out of their way to let them pursue literacy in their own manner, but you give them tools, you give them strategies, you really do.

Betty did, indeed, get out of the children's way, but only after she was sure that they knew that there are ways to go, that she was "helping them to get on their way" (interview, 1/24) to literacy.

Conclusion

We hope that these descriptions of scenes from Betty's classroom will help you see just how valuable a "sea of talk" (Britton, 1970) can be for language and literacy learning in your classroom. This classroom community rested on the importance placed on oral sharing of the dailiness of children's lives, the freedom of choice and movement during independent reading, and the small group configuration and talk upon which writing time was based. At the beginning of the year Betty made explicit, deliberate comments that helped the children feel that they were valued members of this community, that they could and should listen to and use each other's ideas and expertise, and how they could be responsible and thoughtful community members. As the year progressed, the connectedness of community members allowed them to work toward literacy in ways that each found useful and satisfying.

This did not happen by magic, but rather through planning and good teaching. Your

students need planned-for opportunities for talk that will help them develop as language learners and users. These opportunities should be varied, encouraging both formal and informal oral language. When your students are free to explore literacy through talk, they will grow as literate beings. They, like Betty's students, will profit from a school context that encourages talking to read and write.

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NRRC National Reading Research Center

318 Aderbold, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-7125
3216 J. M. Patterson Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742